THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Keeping Alive the Rumor

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John M. Buchanan

Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush alive with God.
Only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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KEEPING ALIVE THE RUMOR

Psalm 14:1
"Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'"

Startle us, O God, with your truth: open our minds to your word. Open our spirits to your presence. Open our hearts to your love, revealed and lived out by Jesus Christ our Lord. And in this time together, renew our trust in you and our determination to follow him and our courage to live lives of joyful faith. Amen.

* * *

"Is it true?" my friend asked. "All of it: Jesus, Christmas, Sermon on the Mount, healing the sick, Easter . . . God . . . is it true? Or is it something we made up to make ourselves feel better about dying?" You can't put it any more bluntly, simply or powerfully than that. In fact, he was dying, and I was privileged to be with him.

At his bedside was a copy of the bestseller *Tuesdays with Morrie.* The author, Mitch Albom, is a journalist, a Detroit sports writer. Morrie was Brandeis Professor Morrie Schwartz, Albom's favorite college teacher. When he learned that Morrie was dying of ALS, Albom decided to visit him, and the resultant renewal of friendship and weekly conversations about living and dying evolved into the book. My friend was reading the book. I asked him what he thought about it, and he said, "It's okay, but I want to talk about subjects Morrie and Mitch avoided. I'm more interested in what they didn't talk about."

So I invited him to do that, and for an all-too-brief period of time, we talked and corresponded. We laughed about my suggestion that we ought to write our own book, *Thursdays with Glen.* He was a member of this church, and his belonging to this community of faith was very important to him. I am violating an unwritten code, presuming to do something I never do, that is, to use part of conversations between pastor and parishioner in this and probably subsequent sermons. In fact, I'm rather sure Glen would approve whole-heartedly. He wrote poetry and could ask the question publicly and directly with almost embarrassing simplicity.

After we agreed that *Tuesdays with Morrie* was good but not profound, I asked him, "What do you want to talk about?" And that is when he said, "Is it true? All of it—Jesus, Easter, Heaven, God: is it true, or did we make it up?"

I recalled something Don Benedict, the head of the Community Renewal Society and one of the most tenacious and honest social activists of our time, once said, "The job of the urban church is to keep alive the rumor that there is a God."

It's not easy, keeping that rumor alive. William F. Buckley says that if you mention God at a New York dinner party, you will be met with a stony silence. If you mention God more than once, you will not be invited to dinner again.

If the Middle Ages were the age of faith, you and I live in the midst of a new and radical secularism, a world which seems to have no time or space for God. Douglas John Hall,

Canadian theologian, agrees: "Belief in a good God is not an easy thing for anybody who thinks to a significant degree."

Part of the difficulty is intellectual. Ever since Sir Isaac Newton, science and religion have been rivals and frequently foes. Newtonian physics contradicted the church's world view, what the church thought it knew about the universe. The church absolutely refused to be open to new truth. The result was a widening gap between religion and science. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution also seemed to be in direct conflict with the religious understanding of creation—a literalist interpretation of Genesis 1, in which creation happens in seven, 24-hour days. Fundamentalism was one of the results of that particular conflict and continues haggardly to this day, with creationists rejecting scientific objectivity and insisting that school children be taught literalistic ideology instead of free and objective scientific inquiry.

Science seemed to be out to eliminate God. In a Newtonian universe, which operates by laws that are essentially mathematical and which are accessible to human understanding, there is no mystery, no spontaneity, no God, other than a creator who started things off and then retired; that is, an irrelevant God. Astronomer Carl Sagan explained, "There's nothing for God to do."

It's not easy to keep the rumor alive, and another part of the problem is religion itself. Marcus Borg has written a new book, *The God We Never Knew*, in which he traces his religious journey in a way that sounds familiar to many of us. "I grew up with God," Borg confesses, but in his teen years his childhood faith began to crumble and by his mid-twenties had virtually disappeared. His return to faith involved rethinking and rebuilding on the crumbled foundation.

He writes, "I do not know why it took me so long. But a major reason is that the notion of God I received as a child stood in the way. Because of my Christian upbringing, I thought I knew what the word God meant: a supernatural being 'out there' who created the world a long time ago and has occasionally intervened. God was not 'here' but 'somewhere else.' Sometime, after death, we might be with God, provided that we had done or believed whatever was necessary to pass final judgement." (Preface).

Borg's way back to faith included understanding God's presence, God's all-encompassing Spirit in which everything, even the universe itself, has being. But first, he had to deal with his childhood God and his traditional notion of Christianity as "doctrinal, moralistic, literalistic, exclusivistic—it meant believing certain doctrines and living in accord with Christian ethical teaching in order to get into heaven later." (p. 2). And he had to deal with Pastor Thorson, a big man in black robe, who was a "finger shaker." Borg's God was a finger-shaker, a law-giver, an angry judge in a black robe who disapproved of most of what Borg was doing or thinking about doing.

Part of my journey took me to daily Vacation Bible School at a big Baptist church. The Baptists, I observed, had better games, better food, and much better songs than the Presbyterians. "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart; Do Lord, O do Lord, O do remember me . . . ;" "This Little Light of Mine;" and one that made me uneasy, "Be Careful." The tune, oddly, is played by the organist at Wrigley Field to fire-up the crowd

when the Cub's fortunes are sagging. I assume the organist doesn't associate it with a Vacation Bible School theology that warned, "Be careful little eyes what you see, Be careful little eyes what you see. For the Father up above is looking down in love, so be careful little eyes what you see." And, "Be careful little ears what you hear, little feet where you go, little fingers what you touch." Even then I sensed that the Father up above was not so much looking down in love as in suspicion, and I wasn't making the grade.

It's not easy to keep alive the rumor.

The Psalm writer challenges, "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'" The Bible doesn't spend any time at all arguing for the existence of God in the abstract sense. Even here, in Psalm 14, the focus is not on theories, but behavior. "Fools say there is no God," . . . "they are corrupt . . .there is no one who does good." That is, belief in God has everything in the world to do, not with believing ideas, but with living a life.

The wonderful Jeremiah passage describing the prophet buying a parcel of land as the city is about to be invaded and destroyed by the Babylonians expresses the biblical notion that belief in God has everything in the world to do with how we view our future and the commitments we are willing to make to that future.

The Bible doesn't argue for God's existence, but does hold human beings accountable for living out their beliefs.

In the meantime, it is not easy today to believe, to keep alive the rumor, although there are very interesting developments in the old, unhappy conflict between science and religion.

Suddenly, one of the hottest of topics is the conversation between science and religion, the convergence, possibly the compatibility, of science and faith. In the past several months that idea—that science and religion are partners, not adversaries - has been the focus of a lot of press: a cover article in *Newsweek* this summer. *The New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal* also have published major articles on this topic recently, and books are appearing almost weekly, it seems, with unlikely titles, such as *Skeptics and True Believers: The Exhilarating Connection Between Science and Religion*, and *The Science of God: The Converging of Scientific and Biblical Wisdom.* John Polkinghorne is a Cambridge physicist who writes that, "Recent science has shattered the materialistic foundation of the modern secular world-view . . . One key feature of the new physics is God-friendliness."

The new physics, and I do not pretend to understand it, deals with concepts like quantum mechanics and chaos theory, which, I am told, is a lot less confident about the mathematical predictability of the universe. "Stuff happens—unpredictable-unlikely-surprising." I loved the way one scientist put it, "I have to admit that sometimes nature seems more beautiful than strictly necessary. Outside the window of my home office there is a hackberry tree, visited frequently by a convocation of politic birds: blue jays, yellow-throated vireos, and loveliest of all, an occasional red cardinal. Although I understand how brightly colored feathers evolved out of a competition for mates, it is almost irresistible to imagine that all that beauty was laid out for our benefit." (*Skeptics and Believers: The Exhilarating Connection Between Science and Religion*, Chet Raymo, in *Daybook*, Autumn 1998)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning said that, poetically:

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Every summer I take a refresher course in Theology 101. At the ocean, I walk down to the beach after dark and look up. Sometimes we all go and lie down on blankets and watch, silently, for shooting stars and meteors. "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth. When I look at your heavens, the moon and stars—what are human beings that you are mindful of them?" (Psalm 8)

Professor Polkinghorne says, "Modern physics leaves us with a choice: either the universe was created by an Intelligent Designer, or it is a massive and incredible coincidence the likes of which we can hardly imagine."

Allan Sandage, the astronomer who figured out how fast the universe is expanding and how old it is says that it was his science that led him back to faith. "Physicists have stumbled on signs that the cosmos is custom-made for life. It turns out that if the constants of nature—unchanging numbers like the strength of gravity, the charge of an electron and the mass of a proton—were the tiniest bit different, then atoms would not hold together, stars would not burn, and life would never have made an appearance." (*Newsweek*, July 20, 1998, "Science Finds God.")

"Is it true? Or did we make it all up?" Glen asked. And while there are no proofs, and while we will never "know" God as we know the existence of our own bodies and the pew on which we are sitting and the person sitting next to us, we are living in an intellectually exciting and provocative time when our old adversaries, the scientists, are sounding like theologians and are actually calling us to deeper and more profound faith.

It is not possible to prove the existence of God. But, come to think of it, existence itself is not ultimately a very interesting phenomenon. The existence of that person sitting next to you is not nearly as interesting as who he or she is; your beloved perhaps, a friend, a neighbor, an acquaintance, a total stranger. It is what and who you are in relationship that starts to get interesting. And so with the matter of God; existence is not nearly as interesting nor important as relationship. And what the Bible says, from the first page to the last, is that not only is a relationship with God possible, but it is the most important, most fundamental issue for each one of us. We can discuss and argue about the existence of God, and it can remain a remote and safe distraction, which is why, perhaps, the Bible nowhere tries to do it. It is an altogether different matter to reach out to God, to be open to God, to talk with God, to listen for God, to respond to God, to lean on God, to bet on God, to trust God, to live in the glorious freedom of God's grace and love.

That is what our religion is about; not an abstract thesis about God's existence, but life lived in the world God made, in community, or relationship—life cherished because it is God's gift to us and lived out in passion and joy and commitment because it is lived with God.

It was a Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, who created a lovely verbal formula for faith. It is the title of a book he wrote, *I and Thou*. God is not an object, a thing. God is a "Thou," a thou with whom you and I are invited to be in relationship, in covenant.

To say "Thou" to God is the beginning of faith. In a wonderful new book, *The Gifts of the Jews*, Thomas Cahill writes, "It cannot be proven that God exists. Each must decide. For in the last analysis one does not believe that God exists. One believes in God, as one believes in a friend, or one believes nothing." (p. 251).

The God in whom we believe, the God we are invited to trust with our lives, is not a philosophic abstraction, but a Thou who creates out of love; a Thou who cares desperately and passionately about the creation and the people; a Thou who gets angry, who is offended, who rages and then repents and turns around; a Thou who follows men and women down the labyrinthine paths of their years; a God whose patience and love and forgiveness know no ending.

The God we are invited to trust is the God who creates extravagantly, not simply functionally, but with beauty and passion and joy.

The God we are invited to trust is a Thou whose being and nature were reflected in the life of a man who once lived among us. Jesus is his name. We know him as God's only son, God's incarnation, God's enfleshment. He, Jesus, the one who lived and died and rose again, is the one who showed us the "Thou" of God which invites our trust.

"Is it true?" Glen asked, and for him it was anything but an abstract question. It was the most honest and relevant and personal question anyone ever asked. "Is there a God I can trust with whatever remains of my life?" which in his case was only a few weeks. "Is there a God I can trust with my death?" "Is there a God whose love is so unconditional that I am free to live fully and joyfully and courageously, whatever days, weeks, years, constitute the rest of my life?"

The answer should not be casual or trivial. It should not be too easy. The stakes are too high. The answer, when it comes, comes not from intellect alone, but from our hearts, from that place in each of us where we decide to love, to live, to care, to give, to believe.

"Is it true?" Yes, Glen, it is. And we are grateful you asked. With you, and without proof, we commit ourselves to its truth, and promise to live out its truth and to rejoice in its truth every day of our lives and along the way, to do what we can to bear witness to its truth and to share its truth and to keep alive the rumor. . . .

Amen.